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7/14/2009 - **VANCE AIR FORCE BASE, Okla.** -- Maj. Jason "Santini" Smith is heading to Alaska Saturday for a training run. He is preparing for a longer run in Colorado in August.

Saturday's run is the Crow Pass Crossing, the toughest marathon Alaska has to offer - 26.2 miles that follows the route of the historical Iditarod sled run. The longer run in August is the Leadville Trail 100-mile ultramarathon - 100 miles on trails and dirt roads through the heart of the Rocky Mountains.

Why does he want to enter a 100-mile run with a 30 hour time limit? "I don't know," said the soft spoken T-38 instructor pilot with the 25th Flying Training Squadron at Vance.

Major Smith first heard about the Leadville 100 from his wrestling coaches at the Air Force Academy. "They had both run the race and I thought it sounded interesting," he said. But his focus at the academy was cycling, so it would be several years before the 1995 graduate pursued long-distance running.

After earning his pilot wings, Major Smith flew F-15 Eagles in Alaska, went to Tyndall AFB, Fla., to instruct in the F-15, and finally came to Vance to teach the T-38. Then the long-distance running bug bit him.

"I ran my first race, a 50-kilometer run, in February 2007," he said. The 31-mile run was almost 5 miles longer than a marathon.

Major Smith entered the Dallas White Rock Marathon Dec. 9, 2007. He placed 207th among 4,019 finishers, with a time of 3 hours, 14 minutes, 13 seconds.

Next came the Route 66 Marathon, Nov. 16, 2008, in Tulsa, Okla. This time he placed 48th of 1,004 finishers, running the 26.2 mile course in 3:16:54.

"The Dallas marathon qualified me for the Boston Marathon," he said. On April 20 this year, he entered the Boston race. "I thought the Dallas run was big with more than 4,000 runners. But almost 23,000 finished the Boston Marathon," Major Smith said.

He placed 2,417th out of the 22,843 who crossed the finish line, with a time of 3:08:15. He was running a mile every 7 minutes and 11 seconds.

"The entire course was lined with people cheering you on. It was crazy," he said. But marathons are warm ups for the runs Major Smith is drawn to. And every one is building up to the Leadville 100, scheduled for Aug. 22.

He has run three 50-mile runs so far -- the last one was the San Juan Solstice 50-mile run, June 20, in Lake City, Colo. "I needed to run at altitude, to see how it would affect me," he said. Keeping up a pace of one mile every 13 minutes, 46 seconds, he finished the run in 11:28:19, placing first in his age division.

The course covered trails and jeep roads, ranging in altitudes from 8,600 to 13,334 feet. "It was a tough run," he said.

The next step in his training for the Leadville 100 is the marathon in Alaska July 18. The run begins in Girdwood, just outside Anchorage. Using the Crow Creek Trailhead, the course rises 3,500 feet in the first 3.5 miles.

"The run goes over a mountain pass, then down into the Eagle River Valley," Major Smith said. "Then you cross the Eagle River, which is glacier-fed, about a quarter mile wide and waist deep. From there you follow the river to the finish line."

During his F-15 assignment to Alaska, the major hiked the trail twice, taking two days each time. "My goal is to run the trail in under four hours."

The run through the mountains is important in his training for the Leadville 100. "There aren't any hills in this part of Oklahoma to train on," Major Smith said. "So I do my hill training on a treadmill in the Fitness Center on Wednesdays and Fridays."

He runs an 8-mile loop around Vance on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Last Friday he did the first of two night runs to prepare for running in the dark in Colorado.

Photos

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Maj. Jason "Santini" Smith, and his 5-year-old daughter Alexia, complete the final 100 feet of the San Juan Solstice 50-mile run, June 20, in Lake City, Colo. Major Smith, a T-38 instructor pilot with the 25th Flying Training Squadron at Vance AFB, Okla., is training for the Leadville Trail 100-mile ultramarathon, Aug. 22, also in Colorado. (Courtesy photo/ Leah Smith)

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"The Leadville run has a time limit of 30 hours. My goal is to complete it in under 25 hours," Major Smith said. By running 4 mph, he plans to average a mile every 15 minutes, running without sleep for more than 24-hours.

"There are eleven aid stations along the course - checkpoints you have to complete within set time limits or they pull you out of the race," he said. Water and food will be available at the aid stations. "You have to eat during a long run. You can complete a marathon without food, but not a long run," he said.

"During a marathon, you are running pretty hard for about three hours. During longer races, you have to keep the intensity down to sustain your pace throughout the run," he said.

Staying hydrated is critical, he said. When running around the base, he carries two 20-ounce bottles of water. Every 8 miles he refills them. He will follow a similar pattern during the Leadville run.

So, between now and early August, if you see a 178-pound runner carrying two water bottles traveling the streets of Vance, you can bet one thing for sure -- he isn't worrying about passing this year's PT test.

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